DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 437 CS 214 510

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TITLE Resistance, Receptivity, and Evolving Literacy.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Higher Education; *Teacher Role; Undergraduate Students; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Purpose (Composition); *Self Directed Questioning; Writing Tasks

ABSTRACT

A question which is essential to writing is--"What am I doing?" The writer and the writing continually adjust to maintain a balance with the exigencies of the task. The question launches the writer into text by forcing a definition of the subject, situation, audience, and other such practical matters. The question, however, also pulls the writer out of the text to a position of self-examination and self-questioning essential to the communicative act. It makes possible a kind of out-of-body experience for the writer in which he or she examines the self in the act of writing in a way that at one time effaces and creates the self in the text. "What am I doing?" posits a kind of resistance to the self that is essential in all acts of communication. "What am I doing?" pushes out of that state of being becalmed back into the wind of inquiry. By valorizing expertise and devaluing inquiry, educators have removed the question from the student's experience. One journal exercise, "Letters to an Imaginary Freshman," helps overcome student resistance to the question. But in allowing the question "What am I doing?" to sit comfortably in the middle of the classroom without causing any trouble, the instructor may be resisting the moment in which her students might learn more from posing the question than they learn from assembling an answer. (NKA)

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ED 374 437

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Paper Presented at the 1994 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Nashville, Tennessee
March, 1994

Resistance, Receptivity, and Evolving Literacy

I want to begin my part of today's presentation by distinguishing resistance to the **other**--to persons, forces, or ideas outside the self--from resistance to the **self**. The pedagogy I wish to speak about is not non-traditional in form, but contrasts with assumptions that my students share about writing and knowledge in general, and therefore strikes my students as non-traditional. I'm going to present you with a question that is at the heart of resistance to the self, tell you why I think that question is important and, in fact, essential to writing, and then turn the question on myself.

Though I would not presume to say that I have found the answer, I would like to venture to say today that I have found the question. The question is "**What am I doing**?" I heard Ed Corbett pose this question at a CCCC a number of years ago, and was struck by it as the central question of our enterprise; it is the all-purpose tool for maintaining indeterminacy; it is the question at the growing end of writing, learning and teaching.

It is a question that situates us in the work we do with written language. What am I doing? What am I doing here, occupied with this particular task, struggling in this particular situation? It is the core of resistance at the center of communication of all

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kinds. It is a reflexive question that turns the attention of the speaker back on to the self, encouraging continuing examination of the process at work. If the question is kept always there, always pressing against the work, it can effectively maintain a monitoring system that insures engagement and quality control.

"**What am I doing**?" is a **surprising** question. It keeps the writer and the writing continually adjusting to maintain a balance with the exigencies of the task. **As the exigencies alter, so must the writer**. The **novice** asks "What am I doing?" as a matter of sincere inquiry, in order to orient the self to the unfamiliar; the **expert** asks "What am I doing?" as a matter of stimulating self-knowledge, in order to **transform the familiar into the unfamiliar**. Only the complacent fail to ask or answer this important question. The question becomes our conduit from the familiar to the unfamiliar and back again. it is a **transformative question** that fuels inquiry and production.

This question has incredible power in the negotiation of text. Ann Berthoff enjoins us to **interpret our interpretations**, and this question keeps us doing just that. The question launches the writer into text by forcing a definition of the subject ("What am I doing? I'm talking about resistance and teaching and writing."); situation ("What am I doing? I'm composing remarks to deliver at **CCCC**."); audience ("What am I doing? I'm addressing a meeting of colleagues.") and other such practical matters. The question, however, also pulls the writer **out** of the text to a position of self-examination and self-questioning essential to the communicative act. ("What am I doing? What is this message? Why am I saying these words? What are people thinking as I am saying them?

Do they understand?") The question makes possible a kind of out-of-body experience for the writer in which s/he examines the self in the act of writing in a way that **at one time effaces and creates the self in the text.**

Foucault says that act of making text cancels the author's being:

> Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing. (From "What is an Author?")

How does the writer become dead--efface the self so thoroughly that the text is possible? How does the "dead man" writer resurrect the self in order to address the next act of writing? Much like the force in a magician's illusion that negotiates between appearance and disappearance, or the sacrament that negotiates between death and resurrection, the question, "What am I doing?" transforms the writer from the self outside the task to the self immersed in the task and back again. We **must** ask this question in order to write.

"What am I doing?" bespeaks a confidence that mistrust certainty. Socrates claimed that he knew very little at all; he reminded us that the trouble comes from those who believe that they know more than they do. Furthermore, the question is one of several keys to the examined life; those who never take it up are not truly engaged in a search for wisdom. When writers believe they know more than they do, they stand on the

dark side of the moon; it is the doubt inherent in the question "What am I doing?" that makes me certain of a writer's productivity. Among my students, only the **real** writers are ready to ask this question; my work with others is simply to **lead them to it**. We **must** ask this question in order to learn.

"What am I doing?" posits a kind of resistance to the self that is essential in all acts of communication. For those who are certain, so certain as to be unaware of the exigencies of the moment, communication becomes a matter of following a routine. If the communicator is continually asking this question, continually resisting the multiple decisions that result in the act of communication, the connection is made and maintained. Those who will not ask the question (**those who resist, in essence, the necessary resistance**) have laid down the instrument of communication and abandoned the enterprise in an important way.

"What am I doing?" takes us from what seems to have been completed, tested, and exhausted into a new perspective. if we assume that what we know is certain and satisfying, there is no forward motion, no necessity to communicate. "What am I doing?" pushes out of that state of being becalmed back into the wind of inquiry.

I think we have lost track of this important question in education at large. By valorizing expertise and devaluing inquiry, we have removed the question from our student's experience. The fact is that only the most well-established thinkers and writers are allowed to ask, "What am I doing?" in public forums without fear of censure, mostly because we can receive it from experts as a kind of play. We don't really believe that

someone like Ed Corbett doesn't know what he's doing, but we're willing to indulge him in posing the question. For most, however, uncertainty and self-interrogation are not encouraged in the public discourse. **Resistance is implicitly expected to be directed at the other, not the self**, in the behavior of the sound mind; in fact, the sounder and more educated the mind, the less we expect to hear the question, "What am I doing?"

And so, "**What am I doing**?" When I present instruction designed to encourage the question, my students are often quick to resist. In response to their resistance, I have turned a number of tasks a quarter or half turn, trying to maintain the spirit of self-examination within a thin, palatable shell of authorial certainty. For example, I use a journal task called "Letters to an Imaginary Freshman" in which, once each week, everyone explains some aspect of college life to an imaginary freshman in next year's class. Questions posed in this series include, "What was your best day at college so far?" "What should a first year student be certain to bring along, including both material and non-material essentials?" "What was the biggest problem you have solved at college and how have you solved it?" These are all obviously versions of the central question, "What am I doing?" but they are contextualized in a task in which the "expert" student experiencing the first semester addresses an uninformed "novice".

Now I know we often talk about creating a context for writing and the efficacy of posing an actual audience and creating rhetorical exigencies. I know all that, but I want to say here that I don't especially like what I'm doing in "Letters to an Imaginary Freshman", precisely because I am dressing up a legitimate moment of resistance to the

self ("What am I doing in college? Why am I here? How well am I adjusting to a new environment, new companions, a new life?") in an attempt to make it feel like a moment of confident expertise. There are a number of assignments in my first writing course that tend to work toward that effect. It takes great courage to say in an absolutely unfamiliar situation, "I am not certain. What am I doing?" I am trying to spare my students the necessity of that courage. The tasks I have designed carry them to the same answers, of course. I wonder, though, if in sparing them the difficulty of the real question, I am carrying them over an important rite of passage. I wonder if, in avoiding their possible discomfort; I am resisting the moment in which they might learn more from posing the question then they learn from assembling an answer.

So that is what I am doing, or at least what I think I am doing, at this moment. I am creating occasions in which writers resist the self without knowing that they are doing so; I am dressing up the question, "What am I doing?" so that it can sit comfortably in the middle of my classroom without causing any trouble. I must ask myself, however, if I believe that this question is essential (which I do), am I not obliged to present it in a more honest fashion, designing difficult, challenging and discomfiting tasks in which my students might face it more directly?

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